



Wealth with a Conscience

Early whaling merchants lived in elegant houses along this street. But by the time Benjamin Rodman built this Federal-style home in 1821, many of his wealthy friends were moving uphill away from this shoreside neighborhood.

Though born into a prosperous whaling family, Rodman committed himself to the city's working poor. He and his wife Susan were founding members of the New Bedford Benevolent Society, created "to devise some means for the relief of the physical and moral wants of the poor of this town." In the 1830s he began championing the abolition of slavery. While whaling wealth is apparent in the city's historic houses, the owners' lives reflected some of the powerful social issues of the time.

Yesterday I suppose you know was an awful storm, but I went in the evening to Ben Rodman's party. All that clique were there and all talking abolition.

Debora Weston, April 15, 1839



By the 1890s Rodman's house was hemmed in on all sides by storefronts and warehouse space. Used as a warehouse for forty years, the mansion was purchased and donated to the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) in 1965. WHALE removed the structure's modern additions and restored the building.

Photos Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum.



The Benjamin Rodman House



Change of Address

Andrew Robeson, whaling merchant and steadfast abolitionist, built this Federal-style house in 1821 on a lot on North Second Street, diagonally behind you. The estate, with its conservatory, gardens, surrounding elm trees, and white picket fence, occupied two city blocks. The brick mansion stood then and now as a testament to the profits of the New Bedford whaling industry.

During the mid-19th century many of the whaling elite built homes in this neighborhood to be close to the wharves and business district. From here they beat daily paths to the counting houses and financial institutions, where they fostered and grew their whaling fortunes.

Andrew Robeson's place occupied a large piece of land....with lots of shrubbery and a brook along side of the high fence on William Street with goldfish swimming when boys used to peek through the cracks in the fence to see them.

William F. Kenney, *The Men of Old New Bedford*, May 1915

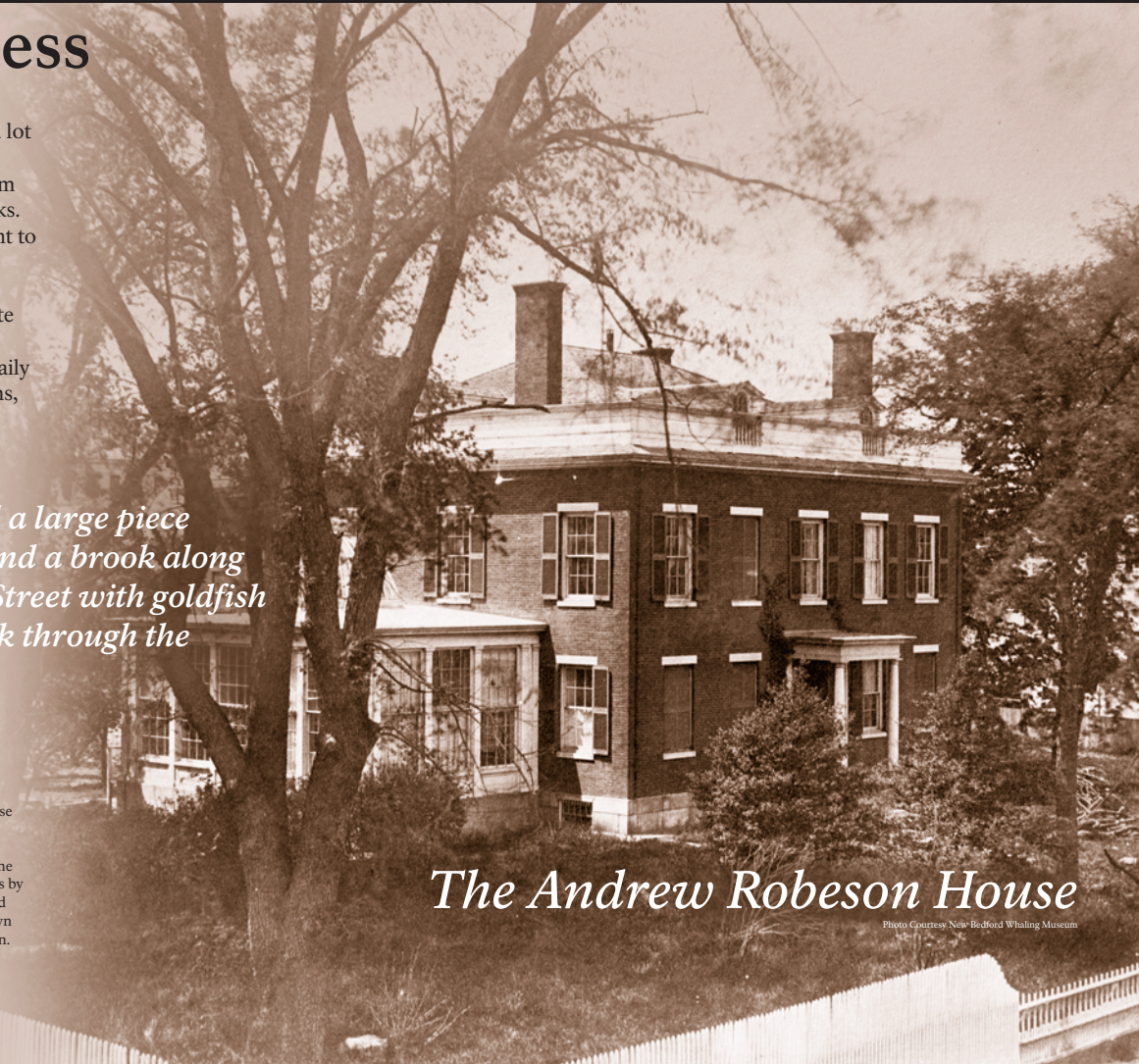


Threatened by demolition, the house was moved by the city and the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) to this location during the winter of 1977-78. Hauled on rollers by trucks, the mansion literally scraped the Custom House as it moved down William Street to its new foundation.

Photo Courtesy WHALE

The Andrew Robeson House

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum





Saving Mariners' Souls

After months at sea, many whaling men were unable to resist the temptations of this port city. In 1832, the New Bedford Port Society for the Moral Improvement of Seamen opened this mariners' chapel "to protect the rights and interests of Seamen, and to furnish them with...moral, intellectual and religious instruction."

By supplying Bibles and nondenominational services, the Bethel (chapel) hoped to combat all those influences to which the port's mariners fell prey—liquor, licentiousness, and dishonest merchants. A survey in 1852 found 37 "liquor shops" and 21 "houses of ill repute" in this ward alone.

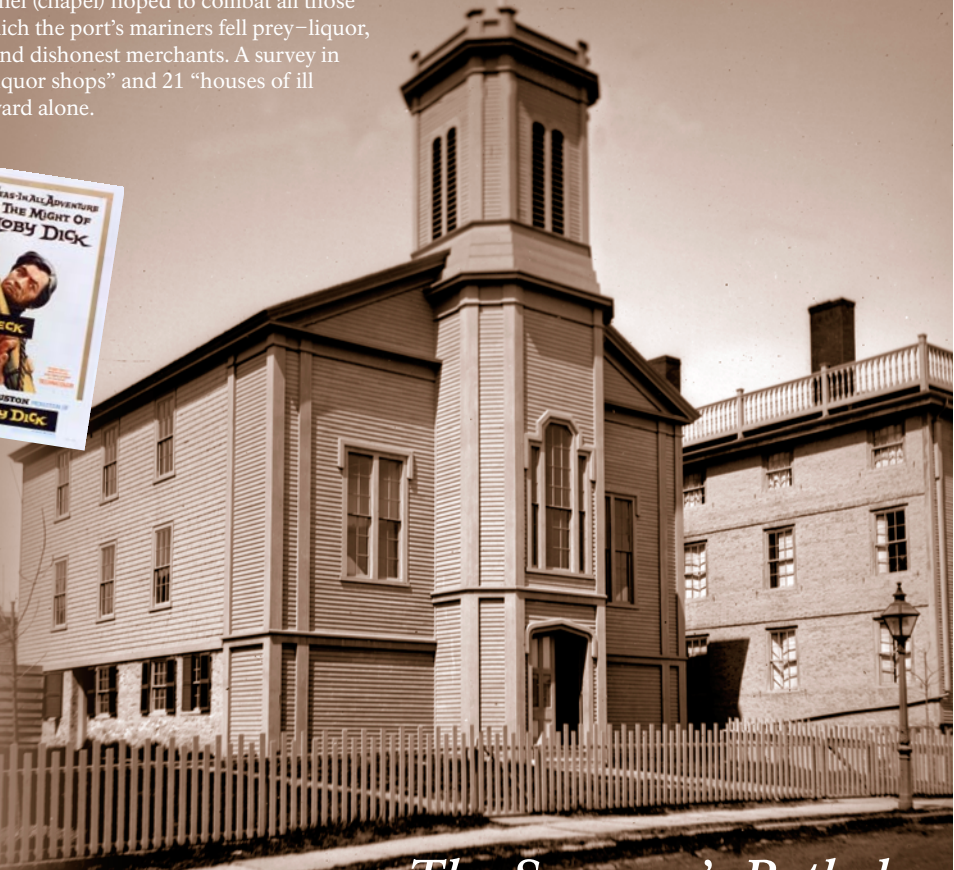


Poster and Historic Photo
Courtesy New Bedford
Whaling Museum
Interior Photo by Tim Sylvia



Herman Melville visited the Seamen's Bethel before shipping out on the whale ship *Acushnet* in 1841. Ten years later, in *Moby-Dick*, he described the chapel's cenotaphs—markers on the chapel's walls for those who lost their lives at sea.

After John Huston's movie *Moby Dick* appeared in theaters in 1956, visitors to the Bethel expected to see a bow-shaped pulpit like the one in the film, based on the one Herman Melville imagined for the Bethel in his novel. The Port Society hired small boat designer and builder Palmer Scott to make the current pulpit, installed in 1961.



The Seamen's Bethel



Home Away from Sea

Whaling men spent much of their lives at sea. The ship was their home. Back in port, most of the poor, unskilled sailors knew no one in New Bedford and were essentially homeless until the next voyage.

In 1850 the daughter of William Rotch, Jr., one of New Bedford's leading whaling merchants, donated her father's house to shelter and feed needy seamen. After the whaling industry declined, retired whalemens, merchant seamen, and fishermen lived here. The Mariners' Home provides lodging for mariners to this day.

Last Saturday, just at night, a poor sailor that had been castaway called on me for assistance. He had nowhere to go for food and shelter. I gave him a good supper and then sent him to the Sailors' Home.

Diary of Rev. Moses How, chaplain,
Seamen's Bethel, March 2, 1852



Men went to sea with an "outfit" of clothes and supplies advanced to them against their "lay"—their share of a voyage's net profit. Some lays were so small, and some voyages so unlucky, that whalemens often returned with little or nothing to show for their time at sea.

Photos Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum



The Mariners' Home



Preserving Whaling's Legacy: The New Bedford Whaling Museum

In 1915, in the waning light of whaling's final decade, Emily Howland Bourne financed the construction of a museum building to honor her whaling merchant father, Jonathan Bourne, Jr. This marked the first

steadfast effort to preserve New Bedford's whaling legacy. Housed here today are the world's largest collections of whaling art and artifacts, spanning seven continents and seven centuries.

The museum reflects the skill, industry, craftsmanship, and artistry inspired by whaling. Within its walls are whalebones, whale products, harpoons, replica whaling ships, and whalemens' journals and art. Though the whaling age has passed, its memories live on.



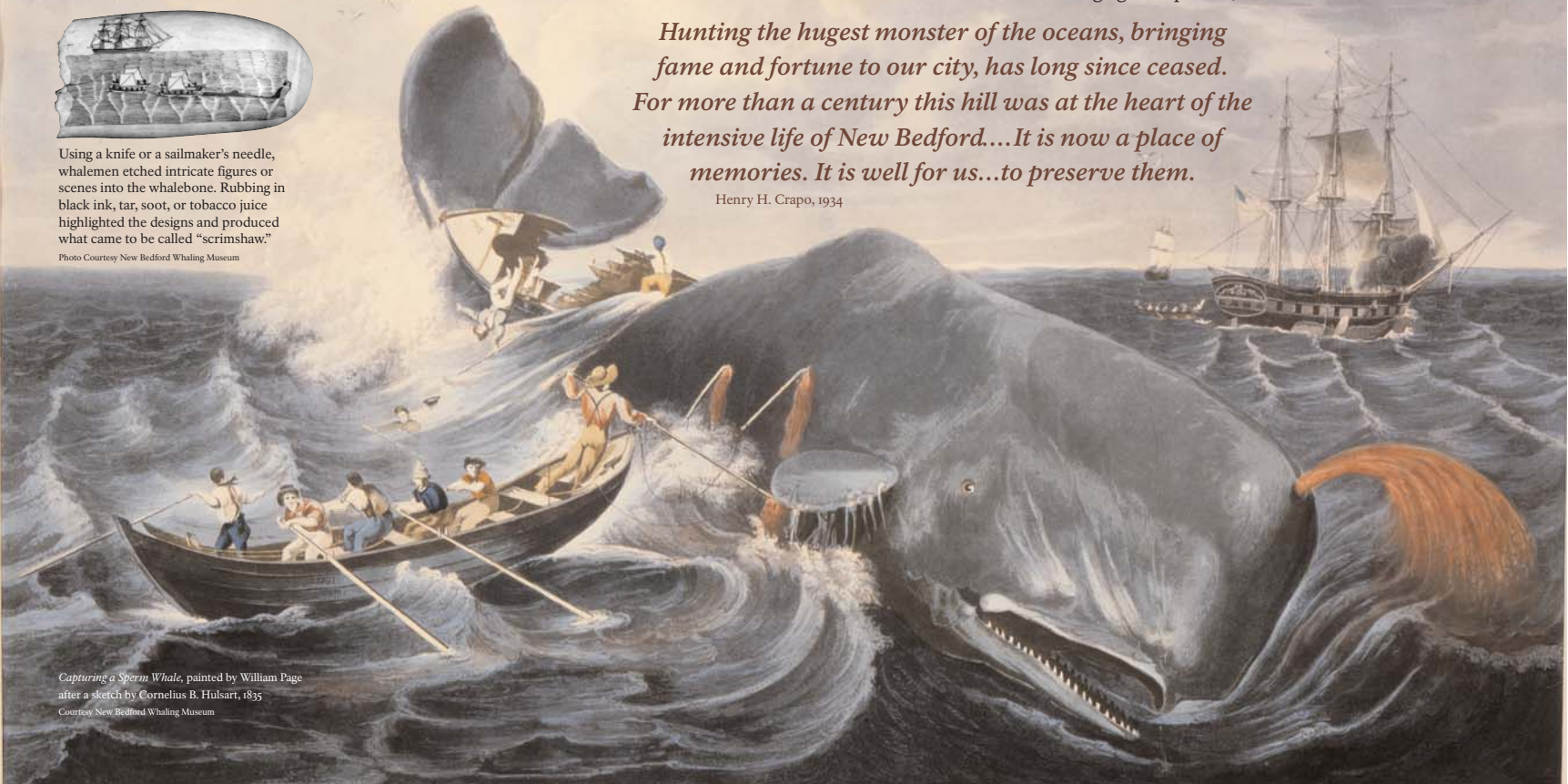
Using a knife or a sailmaker's needle, whalemens etched intricate figures or scenes into the whalebone. Rubbing in black ink, tar, soot, or tobacco juice highlighted the designs and produced what came to be called "scrimshaw."

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

Hunting the hugest monster of the oceans, bringing fame and fortune to our city, has long since ceased. For more than a century this hill was at the heart of the intensive life of New Bedford....It is now a place of memories. It is well for us...to preserve them.

Henry H. Crapo, 1934

Capturing a Sperm Whale, painted by William Page after a sketch by Cornelius B. Hulsart, 1835
Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum



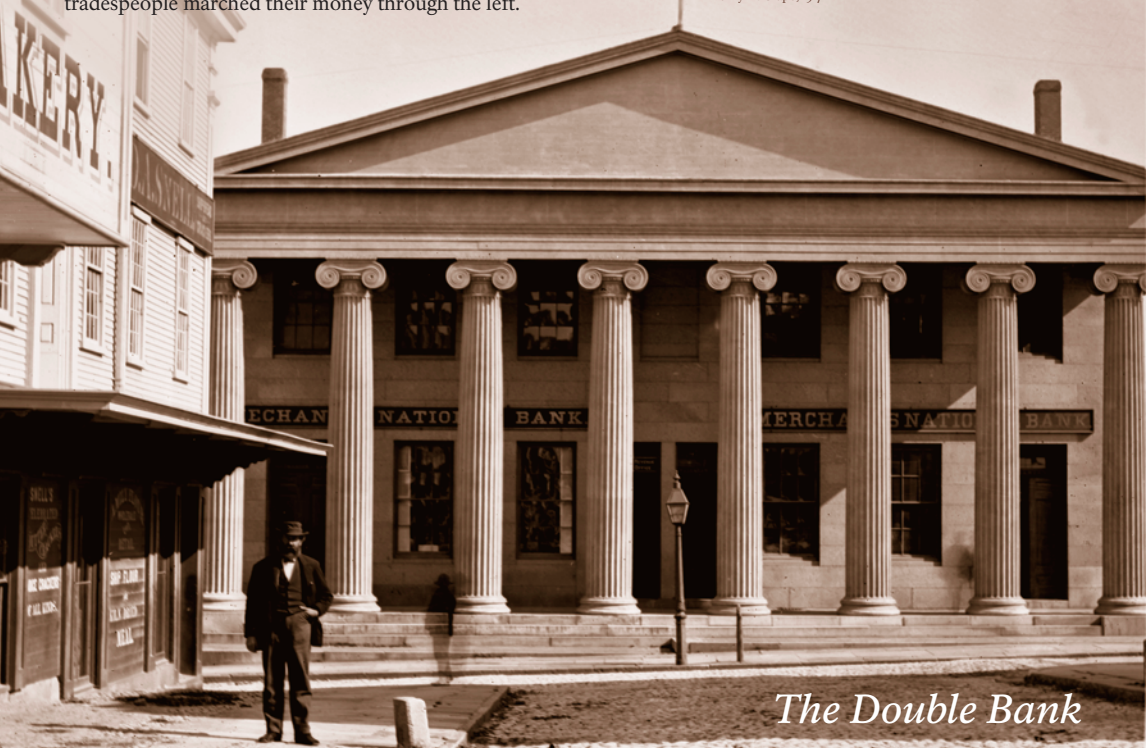


Seeing Double

As you gaze across Water Street toward the eight-pillar institution, compare closely what you see in the photograph with what stands here today. Built in 1831, the building was designed by Architect Russell Warren. For 61 years the building housed two banks — Merchants Bank on the right and Mechanics Bank on the left. The prosperous whaling elite walked their money through the right door, while humble shopkeepers and skilled tradespeople marched their money through the left.

Water street...was the Wall street of New Bedford. Practically all the banks, insurance offices, brokers' offices, lawyers' offices and telegraph offices were concentrated within these limits.

Henry H. Crapo, 1917



The Double Bank

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum



New Bedford Lights the World

Candles were a prime product of the early whaling industry. On the corner across the street, the Rodman Candleworks, built about 1810, is one of only two surviving candleworks buildings in New Bedford, once known worldwide for the quality of its spermaceti candles.

The process of making candles from spermaceti—the solid, waxy substance found in a sperm whale's head—was a closely guarded secret when Samuel Rodman learned it. Making a spermaceti candle took from fall to the following summer and involved repeated pressing, congealing, and heating. But before petroleum was discovered, a spermaceti candle was the best candle on the market. It was hard, burned a long time, and its light was bright and white.

The light of a spermaceti candle was so bright that it was used to calibrate the Standard International Candle, a unit of light intensity that was applied when incandescent lightbulbs were introduced in the 19th century. In 1849 there were 19 "candlehouses and oil factories" in New Bedford.



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Successors to Chas. H. Leonard and Light and Petroleum,
—MANUFACTURERS OF—
SPERM and WHALE OIL,
SPERMACETI,
PATENT AND PLAIN SPERM CANDLES,
Wale Pressings, Sperm and Whale Oil Soap.
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No. 50 South Water St., NEW BEDFORD, MASS.

WM. F. POTTER & CO.,
WHOLESALE GROCERS,
—AND DEALERS IN—
Petroleum Oil, Provisions, and Country Produce,
Union St., corner Front, NEW BEDFORD.

Advertisement for Spermaceti Candles,
New Bedford city directory 1881-1882

Candle Photo by Tim Sylvia
Artifact and Advertisement Courtesy New Bedford
Whaling Museum



Dependent on Sails

For more than one hundred years a sail loft occupied the attic of the granite building of C.E. Beckman Company. Begun as Simpson Hart's sail loft in 1843, it was one of a dozen sailmaking firms in New Bedford by 1850.

When Swedish immigrant Charles Emil Beckman bought the property in 1918, a local newspaper wrote, "The building is one of the monuments of the whaling industry.... For a half century or more it has been the leading loft for the making of sails for whaling ships, and there today sails are made that are shipped to many parts of the world."

They [whaling captains] would come in and order sails. And I know instead of being paid sometimes we got a share, you know, one two-hundreth of the catch or something like that rather than getting cash.... And sometimes that worked out all right, sometimes it didn't. Charles W. Beckman, 2001



Briggs & Beckman Sail Loft, about 1920

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum



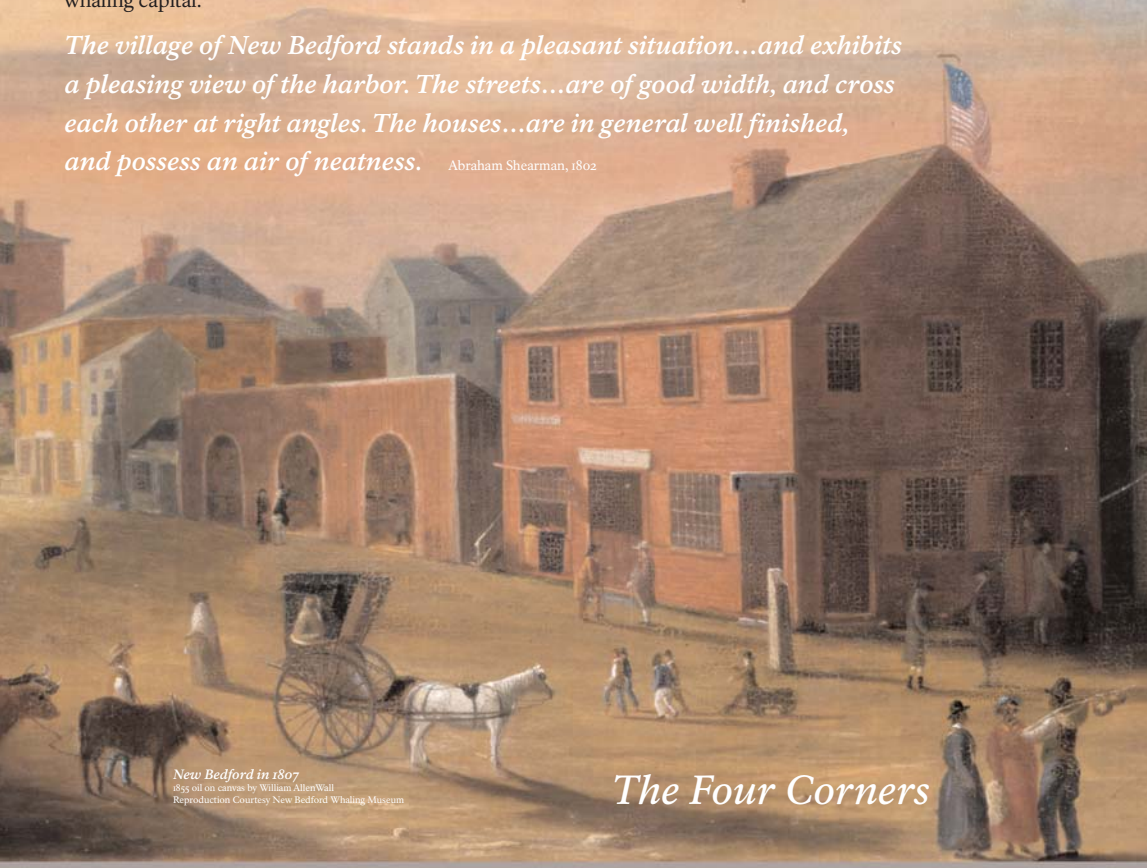
Crossroads of Whaling

This painting shows the junction of Water and Union streets in 1807—a quieter, simpler time in New Bedford's history. Nantucket was then the nation's whaling center. But after 1820 the intersection where you are standing would become the main crossroads of the world's whaling capital.

The village of New Bedford stands in a pleasant situation...and exhibits a pleasing view of the harbor. The streets...are of good width, and cross each other at right angles. The houses...are in general well finished, and possess an air of neatness.

Abraham Shearman, 1802

From 1800 to 1830, the town's population increased from 1,000 to 7,685 people, and doubled again by 1845. During that time, most of the people and buildings you would have passed in this neighborhood would have been associated with the whaling industry.



New Bedford in 1807
1855 oil on canvas by William Allen Wall
Reproduction Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

The Four Corners



Utility Over Elegance

The view down Centre Street has changed little over the years, and no street in New Bedford served the whaling industry longer. Little finery can be seen in the facades of these buildings, for this was a working waterfront, where utility overrode the need for elegance.

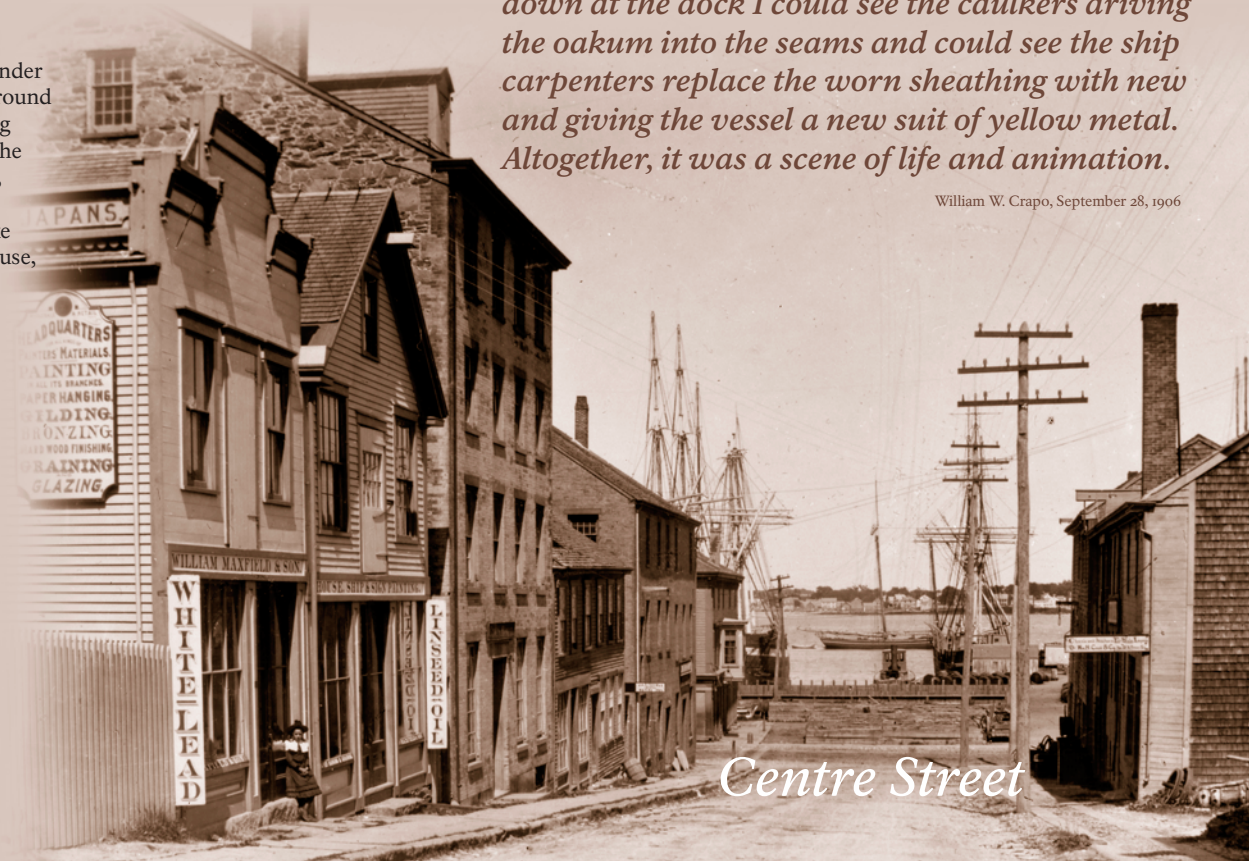
Where Centre meets Front Street, town founder Joseph Russell built the first candleworks around 1768 to further his investment in the growing whaling industry. The brick warehouses at the bottom of the street at left, built about 1790, housed a ship chandlery and iron business. At times, other buildings here served as bake shops, an ice plant and cold storage warehouse, and a ship and house painter's shop.

This 1890 photograph of Centre Street was taken when whaling was still a viable business in New Bedford. Most of the shops then made gains by "fitting out" the whalers for their long voyages.

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

I could look down Centre Street and...see and also hear coopers driving the hoops, tightening the large casks of oil...When a ship was hove down at the dock I could see the caulkers driving the oakum into the seams and could see the ship carpenters replace the worn sheathing with new and giving the vessel a new suit of yellow metal. Altogether, it was a scene of life and animation.

William W. Crapo, September 28, 1906



Centre Street